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Tell us what's next

By David Bowen
Contributing columnist

Now that Massachusetts and State of the Union are behind us, what direction will President Obama choose?

In his impressive first State of the Union message, he accepted "my share of the blame" for "not explaining more clearly to the American people" what he has been doing with health care reform and other weighty matters.

It would be fairer to say that he should accept all of the blame, as in a famous movie line: "What we have here is a failure to communicate."

That is amazing, given the fact that Obama is one of the brightest and most eloquent presidents in American history. But his many speeches have not focused on

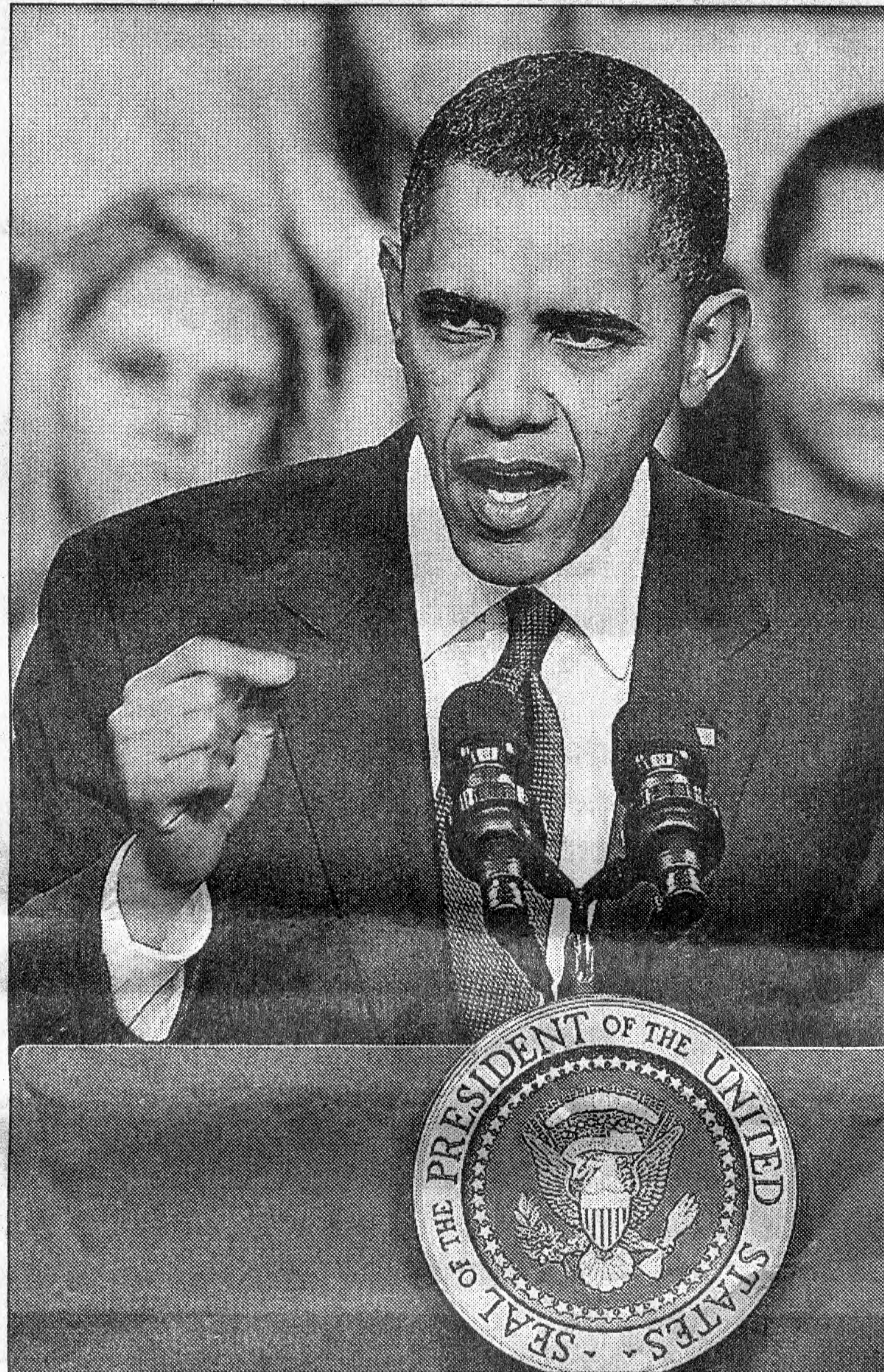


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what the American people want to hear — a clear, concise and direct explanation of the case for health care reform and the economic argument for a public stimulus program, bank bailouts, saving America's auto industry and passing financial regulations to avoid another meltdown — in the style of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats.

Face it, Obama may not be a warm and chatty kind of guy. His recent televised Q&A meeting with House Republicans, however, indicates he is very serious about better communication and bipartisanship. He says he wants to work with them on health care, so we shall see.

Explaining health care reform has, of course, been



Jim Cole/The Associated Press

President Barack Obama speaks during a town hall meeting in Nashua, N.H., on Tuesday, Feb. 2.

very difficult so far, given constant changes in Congress, especially in the Senate, which went through a long and futile effort to gain bipartisan support. The Democratic leadership believed that was possible, while Republican leaders apparently wanted only to inflict a political defeat on Obama and the Democrats.

Overall Democratic management of the legislation could rightly be described as "the gang that couldn't shoot straight." Obama got himself into that mess by trying to avoid the perils of "Hillarycare," that is, instead of designing a bill closeted in the White House and then dropping the mystery package on the U. S. Congress, he

asked Congress to come up with a health care bill, and each of 535 members had a different idea about how to do it.

My own view, apparently shared by a majority of Americans, is that the White House should have devoted the first year exclusively to getting us out of the economic ditch and creating jobs. The second year they could have addressed health care and in the third, global warming, including the unpopular cap-and-trade concept.

Multitasking so far has been confusing rather than productive. Now health care reform is on the shelf, and Obama has taken the Massachusetts election to heart by focusing on more modest reforms, including tax cuts for business, a

more carefully targeted and smaller stimulus, a spending freeze and a major emphasis on debt reduction.

One of the principal ways he wants to end deficits is through a Bipartisan Fiscal Commission, but so far the Republicans refuse to serve on it. Saving the country may not be all that important if it also means giving some credit to Obama and the Democrats. Hey, that's just politics, practiced by both sides, so we shouldn't knock it, but maybe Americans are finally getting tired of politics as usual.

Democrats don't want to cut programs they believe are vital for the country, but they'll have to. Republicans still cling to the mythical notion that tax cuts always result in revenue increases, so they believe the best way to balance the budget is to cut everybody's taxes. We all wish it were so.

As a former registered lobbyist for the U. S. Chamber of Commerce, I am pleased that Obama wants to stimulate business growth, but I do not share his view that lobbying is what's wrong with Washington.

I have met very few people who do not have some kind of lobbyist speaking for them directly or indirectly in Washington, pursuant to our constitutional right "to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

What's most wrong with Washington is narrow, vicious partisanship. There are now more independents in America than Republicans or Democrats. Maybe the country understands this problem better than we realize.



David Bowen is a former Mississippi congressman, who lives in Jackson.